

Now Die

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Hinata has been living behind a mask all her life, trying to be a good person-trying to be like Uzumaki Naruto. Then Neji pushes her too far during the Chūnin exams and everything begins to unravel.

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Chapter 1

Now Die

Hinata slowly struggled back to her feet, legs shaking. She coughed and blood splattered the ground. Her eyes, though, when they met Neji's, were suddenly cold and proud. Her lips curled back, baring teeth. "I know you think I'm weak, Neji," she hissed in the silent stadium. "I've tried to love you as an older brother, because your father was my uncle. But I have to confess: I hate you with all my soul. I want to watch you suffer for all the years you've abused me." Her hands formed the seal in front of her and Neji fell to his knees, screaming, blood beginning to pour from his eyes.

She walked forwards, stopping in front of him and letting the pain end. "I could kill you with that seal, cousin," she snarled. "It would be the easiest thing in the world. And it would be so satisfying to kill you with the seal you hate more than anything else, but I won't." She paused. "Look at me when I talk to you, Branch House." Her hand gripped his hair and wrenched his head back.

"First, I want to take away the one thing you have any pride in." Her other hand rose, index and middle fingers curled into claws and snapped down, spearing his eyes. Ocular fluid spurted around her nails as she pushed further in. "What are you worth now, Branch House?" She spat on his forehead. Her fingers slipped from his eyes and she rested her palm almost gently on his face. "I want you to die by my hand, Neji. The one you thought weak. Now die." There was a sudden boom and the back of Neji's head exploded, showering the ground behind him with brains and gore.

Hinata spat more blood on his corpse and turned to the proctor. "Do I win?"

There was complete silence for almost a minute before Hayate nodded his head. "Winner," he managed around his own gaping

mouth, "Hyūga Hinata!" And no applause either, she noticed, as she walked calmly up the wall to the area overlooking the field.

The rest of her yearmates were backing away from her, leaving open space between them. Her late relative's teammates, on the other hand... Hinata turned to let them see her watching them. The one with buns in her hair was staring in a certain horror that was gratifying-knocking Neji down from his pedestal had been worth it. The other one, though...

"Y... you! I will avenge my fallen teammate!"

Hinata's smile was almost warm except that it didn't reach her eyes. Her head cocked to one side. "Please don't try. I don't think you're worth the time it would take to end you. You'd be," she chuckled, "fated to lose."

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Her actions had further consequences than just the death of her cousin. The tone had been set for the other competitors. As ninja, lethal moves were always technically in the offing, but she had set the bar and made it okay to kill an opponent.

It became a matter of the nature of the winner for the most part. Those who were inclined to murder did so. Sasuke's opponent died on the floor, lungs torn open by his own ribs from the final kick of the Lion Barrage. Kankuro gutted his opponent and spent the next two matches working to get flesh out of the joints of his puppet. Shikamaru, on the other hand, merely knocked out the bell-girl he faced, not being one favoring killing at twelve. Shino indirectly killed his opponent, choosing to disable him in such a way that his arms exploded at the shoulder. He bled out before medical attention could have been managed. Dosu would likely have killed Choji, but by the time he could try, Choji was clearly incapacitated and the match ended there. Then came Temari's match against Tenten.

There was never really a question. For all her training, Tenten was nowhere near the caliber of her opponent. Temari took her time, defeating everything that Tenten could literally throw at her before opening her fan and launching the girl into the air to get slashed with razors of wind. Blood sprayed the watchers as Tenten's screams slowly dissipated. Then the wind stopped and Tenten began to plummet to the ground. Just before she was going to land, Temari's fan slammed shut and lashed out, smashing into the girl's back and pitching her away.

Even as the fan moved, Maito Gai was leaping from the stands to catch his student before she could hit the wall at high speed. What he caught was a sack of mangled flesh and shattered bone. Tenten had been almost dead when the fall began, but Temari's last strike had shattered every bone in Tenten's torso and turned the organs there to mush.

The Jonin's scream of loss filled the arena as Temari smiled broadly. "She wasn't cut out for this life." It was only Kakashi's quick action that kept Gai from putting a fist through the blonde's head. As it was, the fist stopped less than an inch from Temari's nose. The masked man held his friend as a brother, leading him away quietly. Temari's legs collapsed out from under her as the killing intent suddenly hit her. Kankuro had to go down and collect her, since she continued to stare ahead in terror.

Hinata watched with an amused smile on her face as Kiba tried to kill Naruto and instead got knocked out by a fart. It was so very Naruto to win like that. Well, technically, it was the dozen clones pounding on the stunned Inuzuka that knocked the boy out-with pretty severe damage before someone managed to be heard over the twelve screaming Naruto to alert him to the fact that Kiba was unconscious and he'd won. At that point, he walked away, leaving the boy to bleed until the medics collected him.

There was some more vindictive pleasure in watching Sakura get beaten to a pulp by Ino. It wasn't that she particularly liked the Yamanaka, or even that she really hated Haruno. But she disliked

the pink-haired girl because she was the worst kind of idiot. She had someone eager to care for her to the best of his abilities and instead she chased an idiot who reminded her of how much worse her cousin could have been. She couldn't fathom why someone would want to spend time, let alone her whole life, with someone like that. Instead, she got to enjoy seeing the blonde stomp her former friend into the floor.

Lee fought Gaara with the energy of a demon. There was the fury at the boy's sister fueling his rage, but also his own sense of loss of two people who were the closest things he had to friends-even Neji gave him the time of day long enough to dismiss him. Gai's broken scream haunted him as he forced gate after gate to open so he could vent his anger. He didn't really care about winning, he just wanted to feel the redhead's bones crack under his fists and see blood spray from someone close to a hated enemy.

His muscles were tearing themselves apart, tendons stretching past their limits as he entered the Reverse Lotus. And then he knew despair as he saw the thing he'd been fighting rise from a cushion of sand and lash out a hand. The sand wrapped around his left arm and leg and tore them off.

This time, it was Kakashi who entered the arena. He grabbed Lee and took off, rushing the last of his friend's students to the medics to see if he could save the boy's life, even if his career was over. He'd had Gai sedated and so would make sure he could help in his friend's place.

DIE

Sarutobi stood to look over the remaining competitors. Casualties were expected during the second trial and this was technically part of it. Nevertheless, there had been a distinct lack of mercy on the part of those shinobi who had killed. The ones from Sand were less shocking, they were children of the village leader in a desert. The very environment bred hard people who rarely hesitated to use lethal force. But several of his own genin had been similarly quick to kill.

The Uchiha would need to be watched carefully. He didn't like the report that his once-prized student had marked the boy; that could only bode ill. He supposed he was unsurprised that the Aburame had killed, especially since the boy had not planned it so much as not been worried by it. It was the nature of the Aburame to treat individual lives as only mildly valuable, considering their hive.

What was truly concerning him was Hyūga Hinata. According to every report he had, she was the shyest, most retiring person in Konoha. She was routinely beaten by her younger sister as well as basically everyone else she faced in combat. The fact that she had casually killed using a method he'd not seen a Hyūga wield for more than a decade was worrying. As far as he knew, and thanks to the ANBU, he knew quite far indeed, the Hyūga had forbidden that style of combat and pretended it didn't exist. Either she'd found instructions that they had supposedly destroyed, or the sweetest girl in the graduating class had come up with one of the most lethal forms of Gentle Fist without help. That was not making him feel better about this. And that said nothing of the level of cruelty she'd displayed. She had inflicted not only pain, but humiliation on her kin before finally killing him and had apparently seen it as no different than swatting a fly.

"The matches for the final round of the Chūnin Exams will be as follows: Sabaku no Gaara will face Uchiha Sasuke. Hyūga Hinata will face Nara Shikamaru. Uzumaki Naruto will face Aburame Shino. Sabaku no Temari will face Sabaku no Kankuro. Yamanaka Ino will face Dosu."

There were mixed feelings in the crowd of genin. Shikamaru had turned deathly pale; Ino had a dark smile on her face; Gaara looked more violently insane than usual; Shino had no apparent expression; Naruto looked more eager than ever; Hinata looked blank, with a hint of amusement; Dosu might have had an expression, but no one could see it; Temari and Kankuro both had vague smiles.

"All of you have one month to train before the next round. It will be held in a proper stadium and in front of both Konoha citizens and

dignitaries from many foreign lands. As participants, it is your duty to your village to not only impress those judges who will be deciding on how to award chūnin status, but to convince those visiting that your homes are worthy of hiring. Many contracts are brokered as a result of a showing at the Chūnin Exams. Keep that in mind. Dismissed."

DIE

Hinata ducked out of the tower silently, wanting to avoid her teammates until they had a chance to process things a little. It would be best that they came to terms with her actions before they could confront her, lest she be required to deal with their complaints. She had no regrets other than the fact that a boy who could have been a brother to her had instead deserved the humiliation she'd given him and she only wished it could have been during the finals. A dark sneer twisted her lips as she considered. It would have been pleasing to kill him in front of her father's eyes-to show him just what his prodigy was worth.

As it was, she had several hours of peace at home before things got out of hand. Instead of entering through the main gates, she'd used the techniques she was not supposed to know to slip inside and enter her rooms. That alone bought her an extra hour because she had to drop the field around herself so they could find her. She wanted to get it over with before she slept.

Hiashi opened her door without knocking. "Daughter." He spoke with all the formal pomposity of his nature.

She looked up from where she was meditating on her bed. Her reply was equally formal in tone, if not content. "Sperm donor."

He flushed. "I understand you have done well so far during the Exams." When she merely inclined her head, he went on. "Since you have advanced to the finals, I shall train you to prepare-"

"No."

"What?"

"You will not be training me for the next month." Her voice was calm and even, while her father's face grew redder. "You have belittled me for years, told me I lack worth and held up a member of the Branch House as being everything I should aspire to. The fact that I have demonstrated skill does not mean that I will suddenly accept you. It is clear you do not care for me. Since I achieved everything I can do on my own, I shall continue to train myself. You can busy yourself with my little sister. Perhaps she will still be worthy as heiress. What do the Elders think, though?"

Hiashi glared at his child. "You will be trained by me."

"You can repeat yourself all you like. I will not be trained by you. I need no help from you. Weakling." She looked him in the eye. "You could not save your own brother-what strength can you provide me with? You couldn't even save his son." She smiled. "I saw to that myself."

She swayed out of the path of his attempt to strike her. When he tried again, her finger jabbed his shoulder. A moment later, it exploded. "You should get that looked at." She rose from her meditative position and her foot lashed out, shoving him out the door to lie outside, bleeding. "I doubt your arm will ever work again-I shredded the nerves and destroyed your joint-but you might not die if you get help soon."

She sat back down and closed her eyes, opening herself to the world seen through the All-Seeing Eye. The forest had been instructive, even if she'd had the devil of a time getting away from her team long enough to find the one she wanted to speak to. That Kusa genin had known something so very interesting. It was almost a shame she'd had to dissect the girl's brain to learn the technique from her. Nevertheless, the Mind's Eye of the Kagura had proven to be a fascinating addition to the Byakugan.

It did not empower it as she expected, but it gave her new insight into those she watched. It had been complicated to inflict upon herself the alterations needed to her chakra and eyes to activate the ability the girl had had, but so worth it for the added dimension it allowed. Not only did she see people, she knew more about them. Hinata let the world fill her as she opened herself to it and let it in.

DIE

First thing in the morning, she vanished from the compound. It was easier than it should have been. Most Hyūga were proud of their eyes to the point of near-blindness about other things. That was something she thought silly-they were a powerful tool and nothing else. She had hated her family. Bitterness grew and grew as she tried to be kind because it was so easy not to be. She studied others to learn how a good person was supposed to act. It had been hard and instead of being glad that she forced herself to pretend kindness, they had abused her. Every time she did the right thing, she was mocked or berated or physically hurt.

And hatred bred resentment. It also bred contempt. In her, contempt was twisted to malice. In her own mind, if nowhere else, she indulged in her natural instincts. She plotted time and again how to murder her kin. It was a calming dream in a way. Each time she planned it out and didn't do it, it was a sign she was winning against herself. But part of her planning had resulted in the conception of a technique that would have been forbidden if anyone knew it existed. She called it Hiding in Sight. It was devious in its simplicity and complexity at the same time. All it did was cause the Byakugan to miss the user. It was a way of cycling chakra that erased the user from the sight of the All-Seeing Eye.

That was why she had wanted the Mind's Eye of the Kagura. She never wanted to be blinded by such an ability. Where the Byakugan saw chakra, the Mind's Eye saw all life. The combination was exhilarating and overwhelming. It had taken all night to get used to seeing things that way once she'd activated the ability in herself.

She would have to be more careful now. She had usually relied on her family just dismissing her to avoid detection while she would now need to use Hiding in Sight to evade them. It carried the risk of being seen by an actual eye, though.

Her preferred training ground was the Forest of Death. It had been amusing that the second round had been held there. It was one of the few places no one would look for her, so she could play there as needed. She had developed her style of Gentle Fist by adding in something she'd gotten from Naruto.

She smiled. She liked the blond because he was everything she wasn't. He was just a good person. And seeing him now, out in the village with the Mind's Eye of the Kagura, it made her feel a little warm knowing that he was there. She could see the goodness in him in the way he cast a glow on everything that made things brighter.

What she'd gotten from him had been overhearing him describing the tree-walking exercise. She had decided to apply his problems of overloading chakra to her attacks. Using the superior control she had and the abilities of the Byakugan, she could target precisely where she wanted with her attacks and cause not only the damage of her family's style, but brutal, debilitating blows as well. It had been so fun to finally get to try it on a human being. Using it on Neji to show him his inferiority had just made it better.

This time, she went looking for trouble instead of practicing her forms. She had spent much of her time devising forms of the Gentle Fist that countered it. Combined with her devastating blasts, she referred to her style as Cruel Fist, since the addition of chakra scalpels had meant that she specialized in counter attacks and maiming. She'd learned the family style so she could fight it. Now she wanted to push herself harder.

She ran through the trees, diving into a nest of spiders the size of horses. A harsh grin lit her face as she landed and began to lash about her, exploding bodies and severing limbs with her hands and feet. Gore sprayed into the air. Eyes burst and abdomens tore.

Twenty minutes later, she walked out of the destroyed nest, turning at the last moment to spit a ball of fire inside and setting it ablaze.

Instead of taking to the trees, she walked back to the edge of the forest. It was a good way to find a few free enemies. This time it only netted her a snake, but she sliced it into ribbons before finding a stream to wash the blood off. She wished she could afford more time alone, but her teammates and sensei would be looking for her and it would be best if they found her easily.

True to form, it only took ten minutes before she was almost tackled by Kiba. A moment after that, Shino walked up to the pair, accompanied by Kurenai-sensei.

"What happened to you, Hinata-chan?" growled Kiba. He leaned in and sniffed her. Then he sniffed again. He glanced at Shino, who nodded. "You're not an infiltrator, so how could you murder your own cousin?"

The pack mentality of the Inuzuka. It was frustrating because she wished she understood it better. She had tried to adopt it, but had found that it was the most effective method of getting hurt or just mocked. And so she had to admit that she knew intellectually that she should care for her kinfolk, but they had made it impossible despite trying to teach herself how to.

"It was not murder, Kiba-kun," she managed when he let her speak. "It was during the second phase and we signed those waivers..." she trailed off at his look. "And I truly hated him with every fibre of my being. Does that make it easier, Kiba-kun? I despised him most of all my family and I hate each and every one of those who share my blood. They are not family to me and never treated me like it.

"I have watched your family, Kiba-kun." She turned to Shino. "And yours as well. Both are strongly connected to one another. You feel each other's littlest hurts as your own because you are part of a greater self. My blood-kin do not. They are petty and spiteful. I have tried to be good and kind to them and treat them as family and for it I

have been hurt and mocked. I will not do so any longer. I am a ninja-I am a professional killer. I will no longer sacrifice myself on the altar of their arrogance."

Kiba's mouth dropped open.

"I can't continue to play the sweet idiot for them," said Hinata. "I'm better than that-better than them. When I donned my headband, I became a murderer for hire. My blood-kin will no longer be allowed to treat me like they have." She patted Kiba on the cheek. "I'm still your teammate."

Kiba sighed.

Kurenai rested a hand on Kiba's shoulder. "Hinata-chan," she murmured. "I know I cannot help Shino-kun with his training for the month. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Hinata closed her eyes, though the bulging veins on her face suggested that she was not blind as a normal person would be. "I am unsure, sensei." She frowned. "My first thought it is no. But perhaps you can recommend someone? Unfortunately, I have no faculty with genjutsu and if I did, it would not be the time to suddenly work on a new combat style anyway."

Kurenai nodded sadly. Shino began to walk away and turned back, resting a hand on Hinata's shoulder for a moment, gave her a small nod, and left. Kiba frowned and left, glancing behind him sometimes at his teammate.

"You have failed to reveal the extent of your skill to me, Hinata," said Kurenai in a sterner voice. "That is probably insubordination."

"This is technically true," admitted Hinata. "On the other hand, as a ninja in service to a hidden village, it is my prerogative and, in fact, my duty to hide my abilities from everyone so that they may be a surprise. We can argue, if you like, or we can discuss the potential teachers you know."

"If you hadn't interrupted," Kurenai replied, "I would have finished my point. Since I do not know your abilities, I cannot recommend someone to teach you."

"I will keep much of it to myself nevertheless. Still, I suppose I can give an overview." Hinata still had her eyes closed. "I have some skill in elemental ninjutsu, but nothing special. My own evaluation, for what it's worth, is that my ninjutsu is probably somewhere around chūnin-level. I have little skill with genjutsu, but I am fairly certain that I can break them with ease, though I would welcome a chance to test that with you, sensei." She smiled faintly. "Much of my skill is in close combat. I am working on extending my range, of course, but right now I specialize in point-blank combat. I would say that I have the ability to face a jonin, though only because if I land a hit, it will quite likely end the combat. My skills are strictly lethal. That's part of the reason I have not used them in spars, sensei."

"That could be a problem," muttered Kurenai. "The first person that comes to mind to teach close combat will certainly not help you. Maito Gai has only refrained from hunting you down because you are a Konoha ninja." Hinata's nod was worrying the older woman. "Aside from him... Kakashi is out because he's Gai's friend and is training his student anyway. Asuma-kun won't help either, since he's unnerved by your actions." Kurenai paused. "Maybe it would be easier to think of those who would help. I can think of three, total. Mitarashi Anko-you met her during the second exam, Morino Ibiki-the scarred man from the first part, and Yamanaka Jokuro. And the last one would not be able to do much for you, since his skills revolve around his family's abilities."

"So, the only two who come to mind for you are both in Torture and Interrogation?" asked Hinata. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"All three of them, actually. I suppose you could learn from Anko," mused Kurenai. "Ibiki is skilled, but his specialties are really not combat."

"Do you think that Mitirashi-san would be able to teach me much?"

"I haven't the slightest idea." Kurenai's eyes darkened. "Since you've seen fit to hide your abilities, I could not begin to guess."

"I understand, Kurenai-sensei." Hinata turned and began to walk away. "I shall train myself. I will see you in a month."

DIE

There was one upside to training this way: she could do it more effectively. Since Kurenai was not checking up on her and her family was presumably alerted to her absence by her sensei, she could just disappear. So she did.

It was an instructive month. She had already concluded that she was no longer going to progress by playing with the creatures in the Forest of Death. So she moved on. It was just as well, really. A month was a long time for a ninja. She decided to do a little traveling.

Despite her age, it was possible to find work as a ninja if one looked around. Mostly she wanted to hunt bounties for the sake of practice. Facing ninja of chūnin and jonin caliber meant that she was actually pushed to her limits. Twice, she had to flee her mark rather than die to someone who so badly outclassed her. Both times, she went back and killed the man later.

She learned a great deal from her travel. Finding medic-nin who worked in back alleys or had turned their skills to killing gave her a whole new insight into how certain techniques could be applied. Hinata spent a lot of time observing specialists from a distance with her unique abilities, learning from their application of impressively lethal arts.

She actually regretted having to return home a little. It had been wonderfully liberating not to have to answer to her family and be observed by her sensei and team. On the other hand, she'd felt a bit of the façade she'd built crumble without the need to be kind to people. It was a price to pay.

DIE

Apparently Kurenai-sensei hadn't mentioned things to her family. Hinata was judging from the impressively red face her sperm donor was sporting. She allowed the man to rant, hiding her smile at his lamed arm until he began to repeat himself.

"That is enough." Her voice was mild in the face of his rage. "You've said your piece. I am a ninja and an adult, you no longer can order me about merely because you wish it."

"I am head of this family!" he snarled. "You answer to me!"

Hinata was suddenly next to him. "Fair enough. I apologize for doing my duty as a ninja of Konoha and seeking to improve myself before the third round of the exams. Should there be another instance in the future, I will see to it that my skills stagnate to appease your sense of self-worth." When her father only darkened in color, she patted him on the shoulder she'd ruined and walked to her room.

In retrospect, she mused, perhaps telling her sensei she would see her in a month was not sufficient to hint that she would be off training on her own. No matter. As wrong as it probably was, she rather enjoyed seeing her father turn puce. Sooner or later, he'd burst a blood vessel in his brain and finally put him out of her misery.

DIE

One night of pleasant sleep in her own bed later, Hinata was making her way to the arena. Her fingers flexed, chakra enveloping them automatically in an invisible sheathe-something she'd learned from one of the most vicious medics she'd come across in her travel. The man had refined his scalpels to the point they were entirely hidden. To those without a Doujutsu, it was an unpleasant shock when they were horribly dismembered by what they thought was a palm strike they'd dodged.

She'd spent a week training herself to do it without thinking, readying herself when her mind said combat was coming or her instincts screamed. The air was all wrong. The Mind's Eye of the Kagura was not the most precise measure, but it granted insights nothing else could. Everything was off. A month of hunting dangerous ninja was enough to refine her senses. She was reading the aura of the village and it felt like an ambush. She had to force her fingers to retract their blades of death to avoid worrying people.

DIE

"In deference to the crowd wishing to view the skill of the last Uchiha, the match will be postponed until such time as it can be fought." Hinata sneered a little at that. Not because she really was annoyed in of itself, but just because it felt stupid to give in to civilians. Only a very few ninja were interested in seeing the Uchiha's abilities; most of them had seen enough to decide he was a talented genin and nothing more.

"The second match is between Hyūga Hinata and Nara Shikamaru-"

Shikamaru raised his hand. "I surrender."

"What?"

"I know full well I'm not prepared to face her." He shrugged. "I doubt I could manage before she got a hit in, and I get the feeling that would be deadly. Discretion is the better part of valor for a ninja. Choosing to fight an obviously doomed battle to try and show off? That's not good thinking." To Shikamaru's horror, he saw not only acceptance, but actual agreement in some of the nods he was getting.

Hinata shrugged. It was all the same to her. She wasn't eager to fight someone she had nothing against just for the sake of killing.

She was amused watching her teammate against Naruto. Both of them were skilled in their own way. Naruto had definitely improved while she was away, but Shino was the abler ninja by far. On the

other hand, Shino was fighting a losing battle. Hinata could see that he was simply unable to drain the blond and his hive was getting lethargic as it gorged itself.

It was inevitable. Eventually Shino surrendered when most of his hive lay on the arena floor, not dead, but dozing as it slept off the bloating of chakra. It took help from his father to coax them awake and off the field for the next match.

"I surrender," Sabaku no Kankuro didn't even let them get to his name before speaking. He offered no explanation for his actions and several observers shrugged. If he wanted to tank his performance and his sister's at the same time, that was his business.

"Yamanaka Ino and Dosu!" Ino hopped down into the arena. "Dosu?" There were mutters in the crowd. "Dosu?" Ino looked around, frowning. "Dosu is disqualified." There was more muttering.

"Which means we are waiting for the first round combatants." The mutters turned to grumbles. Hinata saw Sarutobi start to grind his teeth. After only a few minutes, Ino wandered back into the waiting area.

Sarutobi rose. "Uchiha Sasuke is disqualified." There were boos. "If nothing else, he is clearly unfit to be a chūnin." He studiously ignored the fact that one of his former ANBU Captains was so regularly tardy that it became a running gag that the only reason he remained among the living was being late to his own death.

"As such, we will proceed." He ignored the Kazekage as well. "Hyūga Hinata and Sabaku no Gaara, report to the arena."

The redhead disappeared in a swirl of sand and emerged below, his eyes filled with manic rage at being denied a kill. Compared to that, Hinata's sedate pace as she walked down to the arena was even more remarkable.

She stood opposite him. Her left leg extended in front of her straight, her right leg bent behind her, coiled and tense. Her torso leaned down, similar to the style of her clan, but her hands came up, palms pointed outwards, fingers loose and relaxed. Her eyes had a slight lavender glow to the pale blankness. "You are a cesspit," she murmured. "Nothing but cruelty and malice. You are the mixture of weapon and wielder and you've killed so often that it's lost meaning to you." Her mouth twitched into a smirk for a moment. "You don't exist, you just haven't realized it yet."

Sand exploded around her. The proctor hadn't called the start of the match, but things had clearly begun. She blurred and vanished moments before the spot she had occupied was filled with crisscrossing blades of sand. Instead, Hinata was standing on the wall and then gone again, just ahead of the wave of silica death.

"Just a lost little child, crying out for your mommy," purred a voice in Gaara's ear. His sand lashed out, reacting to the threat, only to see her afterimage fade away. There was a soft laughter. "Pathetic little creature." The spectators blanched as killing intent flooded the arena. "The sobbing of a deluded beast. To exist, one must think. You are no more thinking than a beast of the field or a rabid dog."

The sand spun, shredding the entire area. "I'll kill you!" snarled the boy in the middle of it all. His hand clutched his forehead, drawing blood with his nails as he looked for the source of his anger. "I'll show you! Killing you will prove I'm real!"

The laughter came again, almost childlike. "You're a sad, empty thing. Does it count as killing if the thing killed isn't alive?" Gaara's eyes widened as the girl was beside him. Her hand slammed into his sand wall. His relief was short-lived, though; her hand began to grind through, the sand parting like flesh before a blade. Then it hit his chest. Even with the sand armor, he felt rents in his chest tear open and blood sprayed.

"Blood!" He stared down at the five gashes in his flesh. The sand began to rush towards him as Hinata leapt back. Feathers filled the

air.

Hinata broke the genjutsu without thinking about it. Then she realized what she'd done. Then she felt the chakra building up nearby. That was considerably more worrying than the weak redhead with the sleep problems and the killing obsession.

Then behind her was another bastion of chakra and rage. Her Byakugan picked up Maito Gai and she decided to make her exit as he sped towards them. It appeared that there were plenty of other problems to deal with.

Her eyes spotted dozens of combats between allied ninja and either Sand or Sound. There was the combat going on between the Kazekage and Sarutobi. Plenty of ANBU surrounded the purple barrier, so that was covered. There were a few giant snakes, but the giant toad with the huge sword looked like it was handling that. Still, lots of enemy ninja.

She jumped into the stands, her feet silent as she slipped up behind the puppeteer. Her hand smacked his head and then scythed down his back. He'd been harrying more skilled enemies with his toys until she struck. His skull turned into shredded pulp and her blades made a ruin of his spine and torso.

Hinata moved from enemy to enemy, her hands gently stroking their bodies and leaving horribly maimed corpses in her wake. Sometimes her victim's body exploded as she channeled her chakra into their remains. It was useful, though, to have so many enemies. It gave her the chance to practice and try new things.

Instead of striking with her hands, she began to work on projecting her chakra a few inches out, allowing her to burst a foe from a short distance. She had seen the Vacuum Palm of her family and was working to invert it. Many times, she had to lash out with her foot, a blade of chakra cleaving the target in half, when her attempt to create a ranged strike failed.

She didn't bother keeping track of those that died under her hands and feet. Blood soaked her hair, slicked her face, weighed her clothes. She was a walking avatar of gore. Sometimes she succeeded and someone a distance away would see her launch a palm strike at the air and then found himself exploding. More often, she would just ghost behind a foe and then he was dead.

There was no pride in her work. This wasn't her pushing herself. This was just trying to tally the dead before they could do the same to her village. The brief, fleeting satisfaction she felt with a successful use of her lethal new concept was overwhelmed by the emptiness. She didn't indulge herself in killing-just clinically went about her work while trying to improve with the detached air of a scientist.

In the back of her mind, she registered Maito Gai slay the redhead and then proceed to pound the monster that spawned from his corpse. Eventually, a giant man with white hair showed up and sealed the beast in a tea kettle. She saw the Sandaime fall to the Kazekage's minions, taking part of the foe with him to the belly of death. There was Uchiha Saskue, frozen in the midst of the carnage, shaking like a child as he sobbed.

The worst for the youth came when she encountered him in person as she worked her way through the thinning horde. Her visage with its emotionless expression and dripping blood seemed to send him spiraling out of control into flashbacks. She paid him no further mind as he screamed. She had work to do.

Soon enough, the enemy was defeated. Some fled. Most did not. There were plenty of allies among the dead. Her eyes saw it all. She tallied the fallen, noting a few dead from her blood-kin among them. Dozens, scores, perhaps more than two hundred ninja from Konoha. Many times that in enemy corpses. Civilians had not been spared either. Just in the arena, there were more than a hundred who no longer breathed.

It worried her that she had no further response to it. She noted the count without feeling anything. There was no sense of loss. They

were dead. That was it. Hinata found it a telling sign of her own façade-that it was a façade and nothing more. She might be able to pretend the trappings of normality, but she would never reach internalizing them.

DIE

Two weeks of tense activity followed the failed invasion. She was probably the only person in the village who suspected that Naruto was out doing something important. Everyone else focused on the preparations for further attacks. The thing was that she had seen him and the sannin Jiraiya leaving the village together. It was possible, she supposed, that they were just going for a stroll when the village's single most powerful ninja should be taking up the seat of Kage. Right.

It had been galling to learn that the person she had taken to be the Kazekage had been Orochimaru in disguise. She felt guilty that she didn't feel guilty. She knew she should feel bad-that if she had just known and said something, the Hokage might be alive. All she felt was a frustration at her failure to realize, rather than any concern for the consequences. She should have, she felt, at least known that the man intended some sort of duplicity via Mind's Eye of the Kagura.

In the meantime, she had to deal with the fallout of her actions during the invasion. She had been seen by too many to avoid it. Excepting Hatake Kakashi, she had the single highest body count of a Konoha ninja. She was still impressed that Kakashi had managed to rack up that kind of tally, given that he'd arrived halfway through the fight-somehow he'd gotten ahead of her by a significant margin.

As a result, people were asking questions of her. She ignored them, mostly, but it was annoying. And her family had become ever more insistent in their prying into her movements and life. Hinata had rather enjoyed the fact that no one had cared what she did for a long time. Now, she had ANBU following her around and her family constantly bothering her. Even the Branch House had taken to

spending time with her on the assumption that she would be the next head of the family. She was seriously considering killing someone.

On the upside, she had been given a promotion to chūnin. She wasn't actually sure it was an upside, but she wanted think something good had come from the annoyance. She knew there had been talk of promoting her higher, but that had been quashed pretty easily. She wasn't shocked to learn that there was reluctance to promote a genin, no matter how skilled, directly to higher ranks given Itachi's actions at her age-especially considering that the reason for promotion would have been number of people killed.

DIE

She was utterly unsurprised to learn that Naruto had been sent to get the new Hokage. It was sad that more people hadn't worked out that the absence of the most powerful ninja loyal to Konoha wasn't related to that. She guessed that Jiraiya had no interest in the position and so had picked his teammate to get people off his back.

DIE

Hinata was likewise amused that anyone hadn't seen the defection of the last Uchiha coming. Seriously. The brat had been getting on everyone's nerves for weeks. It only got worse when he found out that she had been promoted when he hadn't-never mind that he had spent his time during the exam sobbing like a bitch.

She was being given joint command of the squad with her fellow new-chūnin, Shikamaru. The two of them began to separate the squad as they had to head off members of Orochimaru's bodyguard to prevent interference as they worked to catch up. On the other hand, she and Naruto gutted the red-haired flute-wielder. Between his horde of clones and her own skills, the bitch had never stood a chance.

It took time to deal with the bone-wielding ninja. She had let Naruto go on ahead because she figured that he had the best chance of

talking Sasuke into coming back. Despite her skill, the boy was able to keep her at a distance with the forest of bone he conjured. The sharp-edged trees and her own lack of practice at the movements she might need meant that she had to work her way closer to get in range.

Eventually, she managed, but she had gotten cut several times in the process. She was still mastering her projection technique, so she had needed to get almost into touching range to do damage. Even her chakra blades could only do so much when he kept replacing the obstacles. When she did get into range, though, it just took a light tap to split his torso open and blow his spine out his back.

DIE

What she found when she caught up with her quarry at the Valley of the End... she got there just in time to see Sasuke shove a chidori through the chest of someone who had gone ahead to try and convince him to return. Someone who was the being Hinata used as an anchor to humanity. Someone whose good glow she saw fading before her eyes. That was the worst of it: she could see him losing that faith he had in others.

Her eyes saw Sasuke's swirl and glow as they began to morph into something else. He was grinning, too. And laughing. Well, she would see about that.

She savored the horror in his eyes when she ghost-stepped in front of him, suddenly there faster than he'd been able to track with his legendary eyes. He could see her actions, but she moved too fast for him to respond. Her hands slammed into his shoulders and hips, dropping him to the floor in a heap as his limbs failed to respond.

"Don't worry," she purred as she sat down on his chest. "I'm not going to kill you yet." She patted his cheek, streaked with blood from both himself and Naruto. "I'm going to take those eyes from you and you can't stop me." The building chakra in his eyes was enough of a warning. Instead of dodging, her thumb, index and middle fingers

formed a claw and snapped down twice, pulling his eyes from his head and leaving dangling nerve endings still attached.

"Oh don't scream," she murmured as she drew on her left wrist and dropped one of the eyes, letting it vanish into the seal. "I hope you'll be glad to know these eyes will be used by someone who is in every way, superior to your clan." Her hand rose to her own face and she didn't make a sound as she pulled out her right eye and sealed it into her wrist. "I've always wondered what you see with these eyes," she murmured as she forced the stolen orb into the vacant socket and applied medical chakra to reattach the nerves to the new eye.

"Oh this is interesting," she said as she watched the future branch away from her. "I can see it will take time to master." Her eye began to spin, although it did nothing to her sight. "But I can't leave you here to be found." Fire was building in her eye. "You were never going to defeat your brother. You had no potential to face a true genius. On the upside, you will soon be free of the pain of knowing that even the dead last has more potential than you ever will. You will never kill your brother. You will never avenge your family. You will never rebuild your clan. The Uchiha die with you, weakling. Go now to your kin and proclaim your utter failure." Black fire consumed Sasuke alive.

She turned to Naruto. "Ah. You live." She smiled slightly. "I'm glad." She wasn't sure if he were truly alert or drifting in a fog of pain. Hinata's smile was brittle. "I don't think I can continue being in Konoha with this eye. And I see your glow has faded. I do wish I could kill him again for taking that light." She patted the blond head. "Good bye, Naruto-kun." She detected Kakashi coming towards them. "Give my regards to your sensei."

DIE

Hinata passed the injured and dying from the battles between the Sound Four and her team. Choji lay bleeding beside the orange monster. Kidomaru had managed to cut Shikamaru badly before the

shadow-wielder had managed to kill him. It looked like Kiba had lived, though he had lost an arm killing the two freaks.

She ghost-stepped into the village, a mixture of stealth and shunshin hiding her movements as she slipped into the Hyūga compound. "Hello," she whispered behind her father's back. When the man jumped, she lifted the curtain of her hair and showed the new eye in her face. "I wanted to let you know I'm leaving Konoha." Her hand snapped out and his body exploded. "I would wish the clan the worst, but I won't leave anyone."

DIE

Ten minutes later, she stepped out of the compound soaked in gore. Her kin had been laughably easy to kill. Her training had always focused on the killing of those using the Gentle Fist and the addition of the Sharingan just made things worse. Her hands had slammed aside guards in showers of severed limbs and her strikes had blasted bodies apart. She was aware she should have felt guilt dealing with Hanabi, but she didn't really care. She hated her sister for the abuse she'd flung and despised anyone with the Hyūga blood. She was coated in it, of course, but none of her kin lived. All that remained were headless, dismembered corpses.

The alarm had yet to be raised, given that no one had screamed to alert people. Hinata decided to take a side journey and see if there were anything interesting in the Uchiha compound. She brought a sheaf of explosive tags to make sure nothing remained after her visit.

DIE

There was little to find in the ruins of the home that had once housed the vaunted Uchiha clan. She had never really paid any attention to what she saw in this place and now that she looked at it, she saw only decay. It had been left as it had been four years before, buildings still bore the marks of combat, telling a grim story of a short, one-sided battle fought in desperation against an unbeatable foe. Splashes of discolored paint marked where blood had splattered

or fire had scorched-years later the damage was gone, but the signs lingered, filling the district with a grim bleakness.

There were scars in the cobbles where a blade had bit through a fallen enemy and rents torn in building facades were further evidence of the death that had been brought here wholesale. The Minds Eye of the Kagura revealed an aura of violence and fear. She took a moment to absorb the sight; the additional insight it offered let her nearly recreate that night as she followed the shifting glows of anger and fear and sadness. She felt another piece of her mask shatter when she observed what had been the last bastion of the Uchiha.

The children had been hidden away in the shrine, guarded by every body that could still move. It had not helped. She could see the roiling traumas in the space when fire had consumed the shrine entirely, burning the final members of the Uchiha. It should have done something to her to see the imprints of their faces as the children struggled to find a way out of the burning building. She didn't even feel a sort of amusement that fire had been their doom. She just noted that it had happened and pushed aside the remaining timbers to see what was hidden beneath.

It took her several minutes longer than she really felt she had to work out what the giant rock was saying. Most of it was incomprehensible, the Minds Eye technique letting her read it but without the required understanding that would have let it make sense. The rest, though... she noted the details of killing one's kin for improvements and wondered if she should have tried that with her own family. It was almost certainly too late now, though. She left several explosive tags behind as she vacated the dark, claustrophobic space that had been the Uchiha's last secret.

She was tempted to destroy the entire district, but that seemed pointless. There was nothing to be gained by it and she wasn't really trying to make some sort of grand statement. Instead, she checked if there were anything of value in the area and, finding none, flitted towards the wall of Konoha.

DIE

Hinata was on the road headed away from Konoha when the night lit up in fire. The road was one of those things she had learned from missing ninja during her time away from "home". It was the last place people looked. It helped that she was no longer wearing the clothes she had usually worn, exchanging them for a merchantman's shirt and breeches and with her hair tucked under a woven hat of straw.

She watched through her Byakugan as search parties began to leave the village, ignoring her entirely as they swept into the forests. She allowed herself a small smile of amused pleasure before turning away and heading into the unknown.

DIE

She took what would have seemed to be a circuitous route through Fire country. As the daughter to the head of the Hyuga, she had nevertheless not been privy to the secrets of the clan. She had kept track of where her hated kin had been assigned to missions and her route was carefully planned, allowing her to intercept the few of her blood who had escaped her purge on their hurried returns.

They were no doubt responding to the sudden summons from the Hokage following her labors in the compound and they were too busy trying to make good speed with their teams to pay enough attention to their surroundings.

Team after team fell to blows from within the forest, death striking them from her palms, her self hidden from the Byakugan by instinct and nature. It was not satisfying work, excepting the satisfaction of completing a task she had set for herself. There was no artistry to her executions, she had no interest in experimenting on them and risking the failure of an untried technique.

She left them where they fell as testaments to their inability to defend themselves and their surprise at their own deaths. Her kin lay without

heads, bodies scattered about the forests with a complete lack of attention to placement.

DIE

Hinata returned to her routine from the exams. She didn't bother scoring her hitai-ate, and so was treated by many as though she were a loyal Konoha ninja. Either Konoha was unwilling to admit that there had been another incident, or news didn't get around too well. Besides, she couldn't be bothered with holding to a tradition that nukenin declare themselves. And people were willing to hire her for more things this way.

Mostly she hunted bounties and sought out fellow missing-nin who were willing to teach a little something to someone new to their world. Few saw beyond the frail form that was the hallmark of the Hyuga. Those that did were the best of her tutors, though none would let her stay a full week in their presence. The small smile and soft tones of her speech did nothing to allay their concerns about her.

Out of curiosity, she began to experiment with poisons. It was not something that could be done in a short-term, since she had not built up an immunity to even the common varieties, let alone a homebrewed blend of toxins, but their use as a form of battlefield obfuscation was alluring.

DIE

Six months after she left Konoha, she passed through Nami. There was a glow to the place that she recognized with a sense of loss. The statue on the bridge told her much of what she needed to know. She stayed only long enough to collect some bandages and fresh water before moving on. Her failing mask told her that Naruto would want her to leave the place quickly, lest any hunters who sought her come here and hurt those he'd helped to save.

She felt no such compunction when it came to the gigantic sword she found in the forest outside the village. It was easy to recognize, even if she had only seen it in the Bingo Book. That confirmed the stories that had circulated around Konoha. She had no use for the thing, but saw no reason to leave it lying around where someone else might come along and take it. Instead, she sealed it into a quickly worked array on her wrist beside her spare Sharingan eye.

On her way out of the area, she made sure to stop off at the bandit camp she had seen. As a ninja, she preferred to kill for money or purpose, but she made an exception this time. It was a perfect time to practice something that she had yet to perfect.

Her stolen eye showed a spectrum of things, piercing genjutsu was only the beginning. Half her brain saw things in the future, seeing several seconds ahead as she focused on a target, even as she watched the whole world around her. The changes she had made to her own brain interacted with the Sharingan as well, giving her a sort of gauge of thoughts beyond emotion and power. It did not only extend to the physical future, allowing her to see reactions that were purely emotional-she discovered this as she saw the merrymaking of enjoying a stolen keg of beer turn to terror before she had launched a cloud of black flames into the midst of the revelers.

It itched and burned as she lashed out with the all-consuming flames of the sun. Blood ran down her face as pain seared into her. She had begun by encircling the camp with a wall of fire, watching from a treetop and casting blazing death into those inside, slaughtering them in fear and flame as they burned alive, killed by an assailant they could not see.

She found herself wondering if they were an isolated phenomenon. She had no place she intended to go, so she walked the shore of the river until it became part of the ocean and began to follow that.

DIE

Hinata had been thinking that she might find a group of pirates as she entered Mizu. If she had, she would have dealt with them because she suspected Naruto would want Nami to be safe. She didn't find them, although she came across the occasional bounty that she was able to kill, saving the heads until she was next able to visit an office to turn them in.

Instead of pirates, she came across an oddity. There was a shore-cave, the entrance hidden behind layers of genjutsu that blocked the Byakugan. To her Minds Eye of the Kagura, it was a gleaming beacon that she decided to investigate. Especially because she spotted the telltale glow of a Byakugan within the tunnels beyond. Also within was a large, powerful aura with the twisting that told of a bloodline gone wild to her eye.

The sentries were pathetic, not even noticing her as she walked by, her clothes blending with the scrub that passed for flora with ease. There were things that apparently were not taught widely outside of her home village. She had learned the technique from a nukenin, but there was precious little that had been done to secure this place against it. Either they did not know or they had no way to stop it.

Hinata had found a good spot on the ground and sank down into the soil. It was not a skill she used frequently, but it had served her well when she faced a target who was too dangerous to approach sufficiently to be within her killing range. As that reach extended, she had found it less useful, but things like this paid off when they were needed.

Perhaps it was the lack of Byakugan outside Konoha. Without her sight, she would have been unable to use this as a method of travel, leaving it as only a circumstantially passable option. For her, it was a way to enter the complex at her will.

Without thinking about it, she had begun to Hide in Sight. Her reaction to her kin had always been subtle hostility and the sight of their eye had been enough to trigger instinctive reaction. She watched silently in the dirt until the three in the small cave turned

away before her hand slipped out and jabbed forwards slightly. Even as she glided upwards, she watched his head explode in a shower of gore, spraying the other two.

DIE

She was visiting Spring Country when she was approached by a pair of strangers. Spring had been a diversion that had become mildly amusing. The discovery that Naruto had left his mark here as well had somehow not been shocking, but the devotion shown to him by the ruler was a bit surprising. To anyone else, it might have seemed disturbing, but Hinata had seen Naruto's self and if she could use it to guide herself, then someone who wasn't broken could easily become enthralled.

She had planned to move on quickly, to once again avoid drawing attention to people Naruto had aided, but found herself lingering. Partly this was because it was pleasantly warm after her months in the constantly raining, always chilly lands around Kirigakure. It helped that she was able to focus here, seeing the changes Naruto had wrought was useful to her, letting her shore up her false self.

Hinata knew she was never going to fix the shatterings that had happened to her mask, but she was able to repair some of the breaks with some time in this peaceful place. To keep herself amused, she kept the place peaceful. There had been a delegation from Iwa that had clearly been planning to pressure the ruler of the land and Hinata had disappeared the entire group from their rooms. It had set off a search for them that had uncovered their plans even as it failed to deal with the question of how they had escaped notice.

So it was with mild surprise that two men in black cloaks came up to her directly. She had been watching them since they entered the village, noting their power and the stains of death on their auras. They had not made any hostile movements, which is why she had not removed them already, but she had been considering it when their searching had brought them towards her.

One of them was pale under his blackened and tattered non-glow. He had golden hair and one eye had been replaced with a prosthetic that she couldn't understand the purpose of. The hands with mouths on them matched easily to the Bingo Book, but the mouth on his stomach, sewn shut and twitching, did not. The Mad Bomber had a few secrets left to him.

That was nothing compared to his companion. People who saw the shell he wore were clearly disturbed, but within was a freakish construct. There was so little left of him that she was surprised it was able to move. The strings of chakra that moved both his body and the armored thing around it explained much, but there was still something unnatural about it

"Hello," she greeted politely from her seat in the outdoor section of the café. Her slowly repaired external self meant that her voice was mild and sweet, the same soft tones that she had normally used in Konoha, if hinting at an edge just below their kindness. "You've been looking for me for the better part of the day, so I wonder at your surprise."

The blonde one opened his mouth and was cut off by the other. "You are Hyuga Hinata and the last survivor of the clan."

"Am I?" she asked. Her posture was relaxed, leaning back. Her left hand hung loose at her side, already sheathed in claws of chakra.

"You are." His voice was mechanical. Most would no doubt have thought that was a sign of his lack of emotion, but she was aware that it was because he was making the sounds through puppetry, his own form lacking the apparatus required to vocalize anything, let alone speech.

"And who are you?"

"I am Akasuna no Sasori."

"You are a valuable bounty, then. As is your comrade from Iwa."

"I am here to offer you a job."

Hinata's head cocked to the side. "Go on."

"I represent an organization of powerful missing-nin. We wish to recruit you. There is good pay and the safety of numbers."

"So few people hunt me," commented Hinata. "Why would that tempt me?"

"Perhaps the pay, then?"

"That is of interest, I suppose." Hinata sighed. She had no particular plans anyway. "I will come with you, then. Until I get bored or find something else to do with my time. I did not leave Konoha so that I could become someone else's bondswoman."

"This is understood. We will hold no ill will towards you at your departure if you do nothing to harm us." He watched as Hinata rose with a liquid grace and gave him a faint smile that was somehow warm and terrifying. "You are ready?"

"Let us be on our way."

DIE

"I was not aware that Uchiha Itachi was a member of your organization," Hinata said absently around the time they entered Ame-proper. "Someone has been most lax in the maintenance of the Bingo Book." She gave a tiny not-smile. "So many valuable bounties here."

"I trust you won't hunt your comrades?" prompted Sasori. He was all-too aware that the actions both he and Deidara were taking to prepare themselves in the case of an attack by their new recruit were impossible to hide. He didn't even bother to conceal his fingers going for the scroll with his preferred puppets; he knew precious little of her

abilities, but what he knew suggested that it was best to strike lethally and at a level not reconciled with her age.

"I do not think I would," Hinata's reply was absently courteous. "Not without provocation, at the least."

Sasori suspected that her fingers were encased with shredding chakra already, but didn't care to test the strength of his puppets against that edge. "I think we understand each other."

DIE

Hinata didn't turn her head to follow Uchiha Itachi as he stared at her. His shock was concealed behind the Uchiha-façade of uncaring, but to someone with her eyes, he might as well have shouted his emotions. That might have been better, since she couldn't read sound the way she could read him. All through Sasori's introduction, the man, barely out of boyhood and only five years her senior, looked on with masked concern.

"I am Rei Hinata," she said. Her voice was almost devoid of feeling, just polite, courtly even. She ignored the surprise on the faces of Sasori and Itachi; she had no desire to call herself by the name of her bloodkin. The sooner their name died the better.

"Where are you from?" asked the man who sat at the head of the table.

"I am from nowhere," she replied. "I wear the headband of my birthplace, nothing more." It was to her advantage to be thought an active ninja of Konoha, but not something she cared about beyond the practical.

Pein nodded, having known that much from his briefing before he'd selected her. He was surprised that she was so distant from her roots, most nukenin went to one of two extremes: being either suffering exiles, or militantly hateful towards their homes-this small, pubescent girl was just indifferent to everything. It was something he

had seen during the fight against Hanzo-someone who just didn't work right.

"You will do. Tomorrow we shall assign you a partner."

"Thank you, Leader-Sama," Hinata didn't bow, but gave a slight nod which was the ninja-equivalent (no ninja bowed to someone unless suicidal).

DIE

Hinata had barely stepped from the room when she was accosted by Uchiha Itachi. He was slightly pale as he grabbed her arm-something she allowed out of curiosity-and pulled her into a room off the hallway.

"Why did they send another?" he hissed. "Is Jiraiya worried about my reports coming more slowly? I tried to warn him that things were picking up!"

Hinata's face betrayed nothing and, in truth, she felt about as much. She had seen the blood weighing far too heavily on him to believe the stories of his butchery. Now, it seemed, that things would be made clear. He was a butcher, but not an unfeeling one. And he was also an agent of Konoha. Were she to feel loathing towards her home, she might have revealed his deception; as it stood, she didn't care right now.

"I was not informed of the reasons," she replied. Her stance was as unreadable as her face and voice, devoid of anything other than a slight hint of coiled readiness.

Itachi leaned down. "What news is there of my brother?" he asked. "Is he well?"

Hinata blinked. She had not expected that. "No."

Itachi paled. "How... why wasn't I informed?" He stared at her and then his brow furrowed. "Where did you get that eye?"

"Your brother," she replied mildly. Her body swayed, dodging his strike and her own hand was guided by her Sharingan, avoiding his precognitive dodge and tapping the side of his head. Chakra lanced into his skull and severed his optic nerves from his brain before exploding in a jagged line that shredded his motor-centers.

"It was sad, how easily he died," she confided in the blinded man who lay on the ground like a puppet with cut strings. "The great hope of the Uchiha-their last chance to be revived as a clan-died." She stroked a finger down Itachi's cheek before her hand snapped out and plucked an eye from a socket. "He was so afraid of death because he would have to face his family and admit to being nothing more than a weak, sniveling coward." She pulled her own Sharingan from its seat and unsealed the one she had in her wrist. It was placed in Itachi's skull and she gently healed it until it whirled about before yanking it free again. "Did I mention that I read your precious shrine? That was where you murdered your kinfolk with flames, wasn't it? They were desperate to save the children and you cut them down as they screamed." She inserted the orb into her empty eye and watched the universe spin around and settle.

"Your brother died like you," she informed him. "crying, but he died sobbing and begging for his big brother to save him. His last words were an apology for weakness-that if he had been stronger, you might not have killed the clan." She smiled faintly as tears ran down one side of Itachi's face. "Do not fret so much. You will see him soon so he can view the maimed body of his sibling. Now die." Itachi's head exploded in a fountain of gore, followed a moment later by his entire body.

Hinata brushed the bleeding tear from her face and rose, a misused water technique stripping the blood from her skin and clothes and sprayed it on the walls. It was about that moment that Pein and Konan rounded the corner. "Ah, good of you to join me," she said mildly. "I was just about to look for you."

Pein was most disturbed by the fact that Hinata wasn't worried. Standing in the room, surrounding her were some of the most lethal ninja alive. Hoshigake Kisame might have been expected to be upset, but he seemed rather indifferent to the death of the person who had been his partner for the better part of four years. Akasuna no Sasori was a huddled form to her flank, the Sandaime Kazekage already out, his mechanical jaw chattering as black grains orbited his body. Beside Pein was Konan, who he knew could level small villages as an idle response to annoyance. He himself could shove someone into the center of a moon. And off in the corner was Uchiha Madara-if that didn't qualify as danger, then nothing did. None of them were actually projecting killing intent, but the effect should have been daunting.

He watched her for longer than was effective as an intimidation tactic, trying to see some sign of her awareness of risk. All he could see with the eyes of god was that her hand was wrapped in some sort of dense chakra sheathe and that her entire body had energy brimming below the surface, primed for use.

"Explain," he said at length.

"He tried to kill me."

"Let us say I believe you," Pein left out that he had sensed the rising chakra from Itachi a moment before the lethal strikes from the girl in front of him. "Why would he do that?"

"It might be because he was a spy for Konoha," Hinata offered. She cocked her head when Pein's eyes bulged. "Oh dear. Didn't someone tell you that?" The coughing from the figure in the shadows was noted for a later address. "Well, he was."

"I see." Pein's expression might have been even more empty than Hinata's, if that were possible, with the stillness only the dead could display. Hinata's eyes tracked a form elsewhere in the tower that was scowling though. "Perhaps another possibility?"

"He might have asked about news of his brother." Hinata observed that the form in the upper floors of the tower had just experienced a serious fit of terror. "He also might have inquired about the source of my Sharingan. I might have admitted that I got it when I killed the boy." It was interesting to see the shape of another dead body go up to the struggling form and help steady its pulse.

"That would do it," Sasori said slowly.

"Is there anything else?" Hinata asked.

Pein stood for a time. Finally, he spoke. "No. You will take Itachi's place. Go get his ring and prepare to accompany Hoshigake." Pein scowled. "Your first task is to go convince a man named Hidan to join us, since we are now one short."

"Understood."

"He is immortal."

"I see." Hinata.

"Sasori will go with you in case you need to... negotiate" Pein paused. "On second thought... Sasori, lead them to Oto's main base. I think it time that we have all ten rings back in the fold. Kakuzu can go with Deidara to collect Hidan."

Sasori's puppet chattered in amusement.

DIE

"Sasori-san," Hinata was strolling along unconcernedly as they trekked through Rice. "May I ask you a question?"

"I may not answer." Without the Kazekage out, Sasori found himself feeling distressingly vulnerable near the lethal child. It was hard for him to tell if Hoshigake was similarly worried, since the man was virtually invulnerable and carried that freakish sword. On the other

hand, if Sasori's suspicions were correct, the girl might well be able to butcher the giant fishman just as easily as anyone else.

"You are in charge of intelligence for our group, yes?"

Sasori considered his answer for a moment. "Yes." It was not really a secret anyway.

"And you are a successful ninja, yes?"

"I am." Something was weird about this line of questioning.

"So can I assume you've done your research on our employers?"

Sasori didn't answer that one, not sure of what would be a safe reply. He could always lie, but the concern was that he had and had found precious little. That was a problem to someone like him. There was always the possibility that this monster walking beside him, apparently enjoying the sun, was in possession of some fact he did not have.

"I understand," Hinata said. "I will not raise it again."

Sasori wondered if he had dodged a kunai or if he was just walking into a trap later.

"How do we get his attention?" asked Hinata.

Kisame hefted Samehada and grinned, baring pointed teeth. "We can always flood the place."

"An option, to be sure," Sasori considered the matter for a moment and then shrugged. He glanced at Hinata. "If you would see to the gates?" He was curious to see what she would do. He didn't expect her to walk up to the reinforced wood and just sink her hand into it, drawing a rough doorway through the material and kicking it inwards.

Kisame scowled-the girl was too short to reach his proper height, so he was going to have to duck.

Inside, the pair found a scene out of hell. Hinata was calmly strolling towards the hidden entrance to the base, killing anything that obstructed her path and ignoring the rest. Those who attacked her had been left in shreds and the few who'd been close had smeared her body with their ichors as she dispatched them. It wasn't the lethal dance they had seen from the Hyuga, just a mechanical application of death. The fact that she didn't appear to really notice was almost as bad as the idea that she might have skills she wasn't revealing.

Her hand tapped the metal doors and they buckled inwards, crumpling in a way that Sasori had most recently seen when watching Kisame deal with a rice-paper door. From inside the sinking hallway, Hinata's sweet voice spoke with an emotionless tone. "Orochimaru. The Akatsuki are here to discuss the terms of your return to employment."

Sasori hurried forwards to ensure there were negotiations.

Orochimaru was staring at the tiny girl-child who had killed his replacements for the Sound Four and then ripped open his hidden safe room. She stood in a stance that looked like the bastardization of the Gentle Fist.

"Orochimaru." It was almost a relief to hear that cold, mechanical voice. Sasori strode into the room. "Leader-Sama has said that you are welcome to return now that it is safe for you."

"Safe?"

"Uchiha Itachi is not a threat to you."

Orochimaru blinked. "Not a threat..."

"His employment with the Akatsuki was terminated recently. So was he." Sasori's manner of speech was matter-of-fact and uncaring that he discussed the death of the most notorious ninja to come out of Konoha since Uchiha Madara. Then again, this was the man who

had single-handedly (with an army of puppets) murdered a Kage and turned him into a weapon.

"By whom?" Orochimaru had to know. Presumably it was Pein or Konan, but there were plenty of powerful monsters in the Akatsuki; that had been one reason for leaving-he didn't feel comfortable around that kind of power not in his hands.

"He tried to kill me," offered Hinata.

Orochimaru blinked at what seemed to be a bad joke. "You?" He quickly reviewed what he knew of her in his head. "Until seven months ago, you were a wallflower. You killed Uchiha Itachi?"

"Two strikes."

Orochimaru's face was a pale rictus of horror.

"In my defense," Hinata said calmly, "I needed him alive to activate his eyes properly."

"What you are saying..." Orochimaru spoke slowly and deliberately with a terrified disbelief in his voice, "is that you would have slain him in a single strike if you had. Not. NEEDED. Him?" When the slight figure in front of him only nodded once, that serene not-smile and her hands in what he assumed must be a readiness for attack, his face became stormier still.

"Leader-Sama says it is time for your ring to return to the fold," Sasori ignored Orochimaru's indignant fury. "If you choose to be wearing it, that is your decision."

Orochimaru cast a look at Hinata. The veins on one side of her face pulsed grotesquely, in her other eye, a spinning Sharingan sat observing him. Her face had no sign of any real emotion and her body was taut for killing. "Let me have Yakushi take command and I'll pack."

Hinata blinked. "That's who I saw flee Konoha during your attack. I had planned to deal with him, but there were other matters at hand."

Orochimaru frowned. "Please don't kill any more of my help than you have."

Hinata shrugged. Behind her, Hoshigake Kisame had a hand on his sword and a look of confusion and concern on his face. This girl was seriously worrying him. After several years as a teammate of Uchiha Itachi, he had thought himself used to the stoic-youth type. Now he was finding that Itachi had been an emotive torrent compared to Hinata. And where Itachi had carried himself with quiet competence, this one had the look of a blooded hunting hound searching for prey. His new partner was a lethal spring in constant readiness to unwind and scythe through the world. It was unnerving to find himself missing Itachi.

DIE

Hidan lasted only a day, and that was a generous description of the time. It was not just that he was incapable of not being rude and sexually overt to anything female, but that as someone who was aware of his own immortality, he had never learned to attend the signs of danger that all other successful ninja mastered. Where the rest of the Akatsuki, S-ranked ninja to a man, instantly were on guard around Hinata because there was a scent of blood to her being, Hidan just saw a small girl and decided to harass her.

She had ignored a good deal of his words, treating them as background noise not unlike the chatter of her family with the added benefit that she didn't care what he said. She had seen inside his heart as she had the rest of her new comrades. Most were cold and willingly steeped in death, but this one was a cesspool. She did not particularly care about his moral degradation in of itself, but seeing it through the Minds Eye of the Kagura made her want to bathe to get the spiritual filth off.

Still, words were words and despite her disinterest in tolerating words from others, this was part and parcel of being on a team. And again, he was just a pit of nothing but foulness, so what he said carried less than no weight.

It was when he laid a hand on her that she reacted. Rather, when he attempted to touch her. The power of her new Sharingan was horrible in its own way: she not only saw what he was going to do before it happened, she could feel his skin on her forearm and recoiled internally from the sensation, doubly so as she knew that the man was such a cauldron of vile things. And she had reacted the way she would have regardless.

Her hand jabbed out. She had remembered the supposed immortality of the man, and her strike sent chakra lancing through the air to pool in his torso for a moment before erupting in a gory display as he was completely shredded and blown backwards into a wall to make an interesting design of blood, bone, and organ.

"Explain." The orange-haired man had not bothered with a full meeting, only himself and Konan were present. So was the figure of a man in an orange mask who was shrouded in the gloom and out of sight of even the Sharingan.

"I did not wish to be touched." Hinata did not make any pretext of confusion or mount much of a defense. She stated a simple fact and let the reality of the situation speak for itself.

"Hidan was a fool," commented Konan from her seat beside Pein. "And we did warn him repeatedly."

"That is not much help when we are scraping up another of our ranks and once again searching for a suitable member to replace him." Pein watched Hinata's complete lack of concern and couldn't help wondering if she felt capable of killing everyone in the room, or was aware that he could crush her like a bug where she stood, or simply didn't care one way or the other.

Hinata didn't dignify the statement with a direct response. "Wouldn't it be best if this interview were conducted with the one in charge?" she asked.

"It is," said Pein coldly.

"He is present," admitted Hinata. She didn't gesture to the shadowy figure in the dark. "But he is merely observing as usual. I gather that since he has not seen fit to command these proceedings, that they are not particularly serious?"

The man slowly emerged, his stance not the affable one he usually had, but the rigid back of a ruler. "I am Madara." His voice was low and nearly froze the air with its tone. Power boiled off of him, billowing his robes as he watched the... the... thing in front of him observe with that same, cool detachment she always exhibited.

"You do not look like Madara. I have seen his depiction many times." She said it with a mildness that was unnatural to the others as killing intent and chakra leaked off the man in the mask. "Just being an Uchiha does not make you Madara. Not when half of you is not even Uchiha."

She swayed back as the man was suddenly in front of her. "You are insane," she added as she avoided a killing blow that was material for only a moment and gone again before she could counter strike. "You wear the mantle of a dead man because you wish for death and the peace it brings, but you are too cowardly to reach for it yourself."

The one visible eye of the man was a glowing beacon of red that was narrowed in rage as she seemed to dissect his soul with her own stare, flaying aside the scarred layers of psyche to be bared as fresh wounds once more. "I. Will. Kill. You."

She dodged another attack with the grace of her clan, the easy motions somehow perverted in her use of them. Something about it spoke of blood-drenched walls and the screams of the dying. "Did you lose someone important to you?" she asked. "Was it your fault,

perhaps?" Her words were punctuated by the dancing movements that let the man in the mask fly passed her again and again. "It was your fault," she said firmly. "You don't fear dying after all. You fear that person on the other side. When you get to the Pure Land, you know there will be no peace for you." Her body contorted as another swing went wild. The man was getting more and more reckless in his desire to see her end. "Betrayed too, maybe? Or maybe not. Isn't that what keeps you up, why I never see you sleep? You wonder if your hatred is meaningless and the rage coming to you in the next world is doubly righteous."

The ground Hinata had occupied exploded violently and the man glared at the crater. "Fuck you!"

"You earned her hatred," came the whisper from the darkness as his head snapped around, searching for the source of the words. "You were weak. You weren't betrayed-you were too weak to save her. Her blood is on your hands, not his." A fireball lit the room, throwing Pein and Konan into sharp relief as it strobed out. Two more followed it, blasting great, charred circles into the stone and leaving glowing rock at the point of impact.

"You were too weak to even go home. All your righteous anger has turned to ashes by now, hasn't it? All that's left is that shield of hatred you use to hide away your fear. You're still weak, aren't you? You can't stop anyone you set out to. Every turn ends in defeat for you." A fan of heat warped the air, making it ripple. "You hide in your extradimensional bolt hole and cry yourself to sleep, just like you always did. And now you can't even escape into the safety of your dreams-all you have left is madness and your pathetic knowledge that you're just a coward." The man heard a step behind him, tried to enter his warped space and realized his eye had been looking in the wrong place and his ears had picked up the sound a moment too late when foreign chakra invaded his form. "You don't deserve her forgiveness."

Obito's world turned a different red than it had for more than a decade as his life was extinguished in a spurt of fluid, his body

dropping to its knees in front of Pein.

The shifting shadow that had been dancing through the room came to a stop behind the corpse and a pair of fingers ripped its eye from its head. "I apologize for this altercation, Pein-sama," Hinata said as the shadows gave her up. Her face showed nothing but polite interest.

Pein blinked, trying get his mind to accept that this slip of a girl had just taken the man he'd been following apart without apparent effort. On the other hand, the plan was still intact and she was probably able to make life difficult for a jinchuriki if she could kill Madara-and what had that been about the man not being Madara, anyway? Something had just gone very wrong with the world. He would definitely not be underestimating his youngest employee. It was best to have her under his watch than out there. He was almost certain he could just kill her now, but that little doubt was what stayed his hand. He didn't need to die. Besides, now that Madara was out of the way, he was back in control.

"Hoshigake, take your partner and go collect the Eight Tails."

"As you wish."

DIE

"So you're my new Uchiha?" asked Kisame as they walked down the road. It was creepy that his new partner was even smaller than the old one. And apparently had even more bloodshed to her name. Apparently nothing, he'd seen damage she'd done to a man who had been powerful enough to convince everyone he was Uchiha Madara.

"I'm already better than him," she replied. Her head tilted back so he could just see her slight smile under the scraps of white cloth hanging from her hat. "I managed to kill his brother."

Hoshigake Kisame had nothing to say to that. He hoped he managed to suppress his shudder at how sweet and polite her voice

had been, but he knew he hadn't managed it enough to hide from the Byakugan. He wasn't afraid to admit that he was more that a little repulsed by her. He'd met a few people in his time who were that soaked in the scent of killing and they were all addicted to the feel of taking life. Momochi Zabuza had been one of his comrades and the man was gleeful in the act of murder. This was worse: she didn't even seem to enjoy the death she dealt, just killed and killed.

"Is something wrong, Hoshigake?"

"No!" he replied, too quickly and he knew it. He instinctively grasped the hilt of Samehada for comfort.

"Are you going to try to kill me, then?"

"No." Not that he thought he could. Normally he'd welcome the challenge and the risk of death that came with it, but the freak of nature beside him would just butcher him and forget he'd ever lived.

"Then you should relax." There was that smile up at him again. "I don't kill people for fun like Hidan."

DIE

They walked away from the Konoha outpost they'd been sent to silence. Iwa had offered a great deal of money for the job and it was on their way to the last known location of the Yonbi. Technically, neither of them had been assigned to that one, but with the shuffle of personnel going on recently, they were being sent out while other teams were being sorted out.

The poor chūnin on guard had never stood a chance. Kisame had a front-row seat to watch as his partner slipped from man to man, her every touch leaving an explosion of limbs and blood. The outpost was a charnel house when they left and he'd not had to even swing Samehada.

"How alive do we need the Yonbi's host?" she asked.

"Not very. Just not dead."

"This will be an interesting exercise then."

DIE

Hinata danced out of range of the giant monkey's fire attacks. Its host was apparently quite in tune with it, since a manifested cloak of chakra was lashing at both her and Hoshigake. The giant man had the advantage of a sword that absorbed the tendrils trying to kill him, but she was far from immune to the corrosive effects of Bijū chakra. She was making use of her version of the Vacuum Palm, blasting chunks off the beast and trying to dig down to the fleshy center without going so deep that she murdered him. It was a delicate balancing act that left her with little option but dodging over and over.

Her hands blurred, sending out a trio of her strikes that gouged a great hole in the thing's chest. Hoshigake made use of the distraction and rushed in, running by the creature and severing a giant leg which vanished into his sword.

"Perhaps it is time to try another option," she murmured to herself as she leapt into the air. She drew aside the curtain her hat draped over her face and looked into the eye of the beast. Its own eyes glazed and then flashed into the shape of the Sharingan. Slowly, it faded away, leaving behind a dazed figure staring straight ahead.

Hoshigake Kisame decided then that he never wanted to be on the wrong side of his partner.

DIE

The return to Ame was to a mildly subdued Akatsuki. Hinata took the news that Sasori was dead and Deidara had lost an arm. There was some grumbling that Hoshigake and Hinata should have been there to act as support instead of Orochimaru and Kakuzu, both of whom had between them managed to delay the rescue teams using their faux-bodies. Still, the Ichibi had been sealed in the statue, even if

their Leader was looking less and less thrilled about the attrition his forces were facing. The sealing of the Yonbi was peaceful except for the screams from the host, but those were just sounds.

When the beast had been sealed away, Pein dismissed everyone but Hinata and Kisame. "We only have two functioning teams at the moment," he said carefully. "Kakuzu and Orochimaru are being sent to collect information on where the Gobi is. That leaves the two of you to go collect the Sanbi. It has reemerged from death."

"Where?" Hinata's voice was mild and unconcerned.

"In Mizu."

"Joy." Kisame didn't sound pleased.

DIE

The trip went quietly enough. Hinata was becoming accustomed to the large presence of the massive fish-man. Despite his early tendency to boisterousness, he had apparently mellowed out after she smiled at him. The silence between them was as companionable as she had experienced in her life. The man clearly respected her abilities and never criticized her actions when they cleared bandit camps on the route to their destination. Thankfully he didn't like chatting even when he'd been louder. Small talk had always been difficult for her and she'd had no practice while pretending to be a shy, retiring weakling.

There was a certain degree of scorn in her mind for her old self. She hated how much time she had spent trying so hard to be something other than what she was without any hint of reward, or even acknowledgment. Now, at least, her... comrade-she was unsure if he was quite that since, given enough incentive, most missing-nin would happily betray their own family, let alone someone they were paired with. On the other hand, when the squad of Hunter-nin from Kiri had tried to ambush them, he had watched her back. It hadn't been necessary, but it was still a polite gesture.

Hinata absently used wind-chakra to carve a wider hole for one of the eyes in the mask of a hunter she had killed. She didn't have much of a reason to do any of this, but she had decided to give it a shot. Her interest was more of a prototype than anything. She placed the mask over her face, sticking it with chakra.

She turned looked into the river. It lacked something. She tossed the porcelain aside; they had another mask to turn in for the bounty. This one was now damaged as the other two had been.

Her feet didn't leave a trace of passage in the choppy surface of the water she and her partner were crossing. River was something of an understatement when it was this wide.

DIE

"Why don't you use that eye of yours?" shouted Kisame as he dove out of the way of a Bijūdama. Hinata assumed that meant that Samehada didn't find the attack appetizing. She herself was searching for a soft spot on the armored behemoth.

"It seems to have a resistance. Weaken it." Her hand thrust forwards and a slight gap in its hide exploded in a fountain of gore.

"Blood," Kisame's voice was a hungry roar. In the dim half-light of the early morning, his mouthful of fangs glowed reddish orange. "If it bleeds, it can be hurt!" Hinata supposed it was nice that he was happy. She watched in the field of her vision as he shoved a hand into the lake the Sanbi was dwelling within. Sharks the size of small buildings and made of water leapt into the air and slammed into the creature's sides.

Hinata's eyes told her that the shell was thicker than her usual chakra-blades could extend meaningfully. Instead she continued to spot chinks in the defenses it presented and brutally blasted into those weaknesses.

Her feet moved easily over the bloody waters as she ran for the monster's leg and began to climb it. The power of the Sharingan and Byakugan together allowed her to seamlessly avoid the crashing of conjured animals Kisame was using to keep the beast pinned. They weren't doing much damage, but it was busy being battered and was thus not firing more of those giant attacks around or otherwise fighting back.

Medical chakra was out as well. No matter how deep it could reach, trying to overpower a Bijū was not a winning strategy for her. Instead, she decided to try something new. She could see a dozen points or more she might exploit, but none of them would be enough to break open a deeper vulnerability.

Fire burned in her eye as the black flames licked the nearest spot she had marked, drawing a bestial roar of pain. Hurting was the trick. Pain could be used to focus, but enough of it would cloud the mind and weaken it to her other powers. As things stood, it had been easier to fight the Yonbi, despite its greater power because it had lacked the thick shell here.

Her hand snapped downwards, Byakugan measuring as the chakra landed in the pool of fire she had conjured and exploded. Ameterasu shot out in all directions. She was forced to leap back to avoid the upwards pillar of it. Since it seemed to be working, she found the next nearest point and repeated the process.

"SHIT!" was all she heard from Kisame as the Sanbi just managed to stay clear of his attacks long enough to fire a renewed blast at the shark-man. A mountain turned into a dust cloud as the sharks began to launch again.

All of a sudden, the work her flames had been doing came to fruition. A section of shell peeled away from the underlying flesh. Ameterasu had spread outwards underneath and weakened the bonds until it fell off.

"Kisame!"

"Already on it!" A giant shark, this one flesh and blood jumped up, spinning in a way that reminded Hinata of Kiba's family style and ground its way into the exposed flesh of the Sanbi. The keening cry was blood-chilling.

Hinata ignored it and began to make her way towards the head.

"No you don't!" Kisame's snarled shout was followed by more sharks, water and flesh both, barraging the creature from underneath, keeping it from sinking away to lick its wounds.

Her eye spun as she dropped down in front of a massive eye. The pupil dilated and another bellow of misery echoed before the Sharingan flashed and it stilled.

"I shall lead it to the prepared site."

They probably would have killed the team from Konoha that had arrived to deal with the Sanbi themselves, but the sealing was already complete, so they just left a massive battlefield and wreckage strewn about for the group to try and interpret.

DIE

"You have a bit of time off," Pein said when they returned.

Hinata shrugged and retired to the training grounds, unwilling to not experiment with the new combination of techniques she had tried out.

DIE

The next month was peaceful for Hinata. She spent nearly her entire time in Ame's training areas, destroying much of the one she had selected as she either worked on her own or sparred with shadow clones. The damage was greater than the sum of their parts as they dodged attacks more often than anything else, leaving ruinous gouges of exploded or burnt landscape.

Things had been rather more eventful for the Akatsuki as a whole. Orochimaru and Kakuzu had attacked the Nibi's container on the border of Hi no Kuni. This fight had drawn in Sarutobi Asuma. Orochimaru had not been above trying to "work on the set" as he had put it and killed the son of his sensei with contemptuous ease.

Hinata knew she should feel more of a response to the death of the man, given that she had known him personally, if only in passing; he had been sensei to members of her graduating class. But she really just didn't care beyond the fact that Orochimaru's bragging was mildly distracting when she was trying to work on more ways to combine Ameterasu with her other abilities. She had decided that was a neglected field of study for her and was something to be handled.

Kisame refused to spar with her; although he was incredibly polite about it, he nevertheless categorically maintained that he was busy with other things. Since that avenue was closed to her, Konan and Pein were both secluding themselves to do something or other involving lots of maps, and the rest of the Akatsuki were off doing things (except Deidara, who was still recovering from the trauma of losing a chunk of his body-or, rather, the trauma of Orochimaru replacing the missing limb with an arm that came complete with the mouth in the palm that Deidara was disinclined to ask the providence of), she instead observed them. There were so many interesting twists to the Tower alone.

As had become her habit in Konoha and then on the road, she helped alleviate boredom by mental exercise. Unfortunately, the first twelve years of her life had been spent in company of people she hated endlessly, so the things she tended to plan out were deaths and sabotage. As a result, she found that she was mapping out the best routes through the Tower. It probably wasn't healthy to be doing, but it kept her from becoming horribly bored when there was nothing to do.

DIE

"You have a new task."

Hinata and Kisame had been summoned by Pein early in the morning. Kisame looked greatly displeased to be awake before the sun had begun to rise, while his partner had the same faint expression on her face that seemed to be permanently stationed there.

"I assume we are to collect one of the Bijū?" Hinata asked, head tilted deferentially.

"The Hachibi," replied the orange-haired man. "His last known location was outside of Kumo, headed towards the Land of Noodles."

"Understood."

DIE

It was not an easy task to find the Hachibi's host. In fact, it was nearly impossible. The one thing they knew about the man was that he had a tendency to vanish for extended periods. Operating outside of Ame, they had limited access to Kakuzu's contacts in bounty-offices that would have kept tabs on a valuable subject like that. The death of Sasori had meant that his entire information network had collapsed. Hinata had reviewed what little the man had committed to paper using her Byakugan, but he had clearly preferred to keep everything in his head. The result was that even if the Akatsuki, or Hinata herself, had wanted to assume control of said network, it would have been next to impossible, with most of the membership lost with the Red Sand.

Hinata and Kisame were forced to resort to stealth, something that the large man was surprisingly skilled at. Perhaps it was because the man was so big, but somehow he moved completely silently when he wanted to. His problem was mostly that he couldn't fade into the background completely because no matter how good he was, he was still a giant, blue fish-man. That also limited his ability to

physically infiltrate buildings not meant to accommodate his size. Twice, they infiltrated Kumo in the hopes that there was some information on the missing Killer Bee without luck.

A month and a half of wandering through the entire country had turned up only the occasional rumor. They had come by way of Noodle and by all accounts, he'd never made it that far. It wasn't until in desperation, they tried entering Kumo a *third* time that they got any useful intelligence. No one knew *why* the man was headed to the back end of nowhere, but they'd take it. Since he was headed to somewhere on the far side of Ame, they decided to resupply instead of relying on that which they could steal or take from corpses.

DIE

Kisame gulped when killing intent began to roll off his partner in thick waves. He had spent his time with S-rank ninja for years and this was a nauseating experience. His body language quickly adjusted as he forced down his fight-or-flight instinct to fight and instead compelled his stance to become open and non-aggressive. There was *no way* he was going to pick a fight with his young compatriot.

"Tell me," she said in an icily conversational tone, "can you think of a reason that a boy named Uzumaki Naruto would be lying in the central chamber of the Tower, dying?"

"You mean the jinchuriki of the Kyūbi?" Kisame asked his partner, only to discover that she had become a vanishing blur. "Shit!" He dropped into shunshin and raced after her.

Despite appearances, Kisame was quite fast. As such he had been on Hinata's heels as she ran up the outer wall of the Tower and into the central chamber. He had a terrible feeling about this. The rest of the Akatsuki were standing around, channeling their energies to seal the Kyūbi. Although Kakuzu was missing.

"I just want to confirm," Hinata was saying. "This is invariably lethal to the host, yes?"

"You've seen that for yourself," answered Pein. "Now take your place and help."

"Ah. There might be a problem." Hinata's faint smile had vanished and was replaced with an empty visage of stone. "Uzumaki Naruto is quite precious to me and you're planning to kill him. I don't like this. Now die." Konan exploded in a shower of wet paper that caught fire as Hinata ran through the expanding cloud. The wall blasted apart and Hinata vanished into the hole.

Kisame took half a second to decide where he stood on this matter. His hand gripped the bandage on his sword and his unleashed Samehada cleaved into Zetsu, tearing him to messy shreds. He was dimly aware of Deidara and Orochimaru making a dash for it, but figured that he needed to support Hinata when she did whatever it was she'd decided to do.

What he found was a corpse just cooling and Hinata calmly extracting the body's eyes.

"Everything alright?" he asked when he saw her face was still grim.

"Two got away."

"I was going to back you up."

"That is..." the faint smile returned, looking out of place with alabaster skin smeared by gore. "... sweet, Kisame." She rose from her crouch and walked calmly back towards the main chamber. "We can sort them out later. First, Naruto."

DIE

Uzumaki Naruto woke up, in a bit of pain, but considering he had been expecting to be dead, this was surprising.

"Hello, Uzumaki-kun," he knew that voice. Somewhere on the far side of his agony he knew he should recognize it. "Please hold still.

You are still injured."

His eyes opened blearily to see a Sharingan in a face too pale to be Uchiha and hair the wrong color. There was only one person left alive with that color. His face become worried. "Hinata?"

To Kisame, there was something surreal about watching the young girl, not more than sixteen, somehow being so gentle with this boy.

"Yes. I realize you probably hate me, but I wasn't going to let my anchor die."

"What?"

"Hold still." He was carefully moved and chakra played over his chest, mending things that made it hurt to breathe.

Kisame listened quietly, watching for any sign of life in the cinders of Konan, as Hinata explained to Naruto the concept of an anchor for her. To think that she could have been so much worse had it not been for this boy was something that made him shudder.

Naruto's face had gone from worried and disgusted to shocked to amazed to nearly worshipful. Apparently, the idea that someone held him up as the ideal of how to behave was of great value to him, especially knowing she had done so even before he had become a martyr for others.

"I can see auras," she went on. "Glimpses of who a person is. You are a sunlight glow of kindness and good. Even at your darkest, you project it onto those around you. I picked you because I have always known that, seeing it only affirmed my knowing."

"You saved me." His summation was both masterful and missing almost everything important.

"I would be less if I knew your light were gone. If it were because I didn't do anything... the fact that you bear the Kyūbi and the hate

Konoha has for it and remain a bastion of light is impressive."

"You should come back with me! You saved me after all."

Hinata's smile grew slightly, still small, but larger than Kisame had seen in his time with her. "I am a murderer, Naruto-kun. I have the blood of more people on my hands than I can count, beginning with my family. Konoha no doubt would like my death at the very least. I do not think they would welcome me with anything other than a quick demise. Or, more likely, a slow one. It is nice of you to offer, though."

"Fine then," Naruto's face had a dark frown on it. "But promise me that when I become Hokage and pardon you, you'll return."

Hinata's eyebrow rose, which was definitely a first as far as Kisame knew. "I promise. Now, you'll probably feel faint shortly after I reassemble your chakra network."

"I feel fine..." Naruto slumped over.

"He's a bit of..." Kisame stopped himself at the warning look in Hinata's eye. "Shall I assume we are returning him to Konoha?"

"Indeed." Hinata unsealed something from her wrist.

DIE

They left Naruto on the outskirts of Konoha. It was clear that something massive had happened. There were plenty of people, but the village had been virtually leveled and there were signs of battle everywhere they looked. Hinata could see the splashes of blood everywhere and the groups of ninja gathering up supplies and working to begin repairing the wreckage.

"What in the hell happened there?" murmured Kisame as they set Naruto down. The only reply he got was a small shrug.

The two of them vanished into the forests.

DIE

Time went by for Kisame and Hinata. Kisame had nowhere particular to go now that the Akatsuki had been so definitively disbanded and Hinata had a plan. They had sought out Deidara first and eliminated him. Kisame never asked, but he suspected it was because as a member of the Akatsuki, Deidara had been involved in the injury to Naruto. The only thing Hinata said on the matter was: "I killed the last person to injure him."

The harder job had been finding Orochimaru. The man had clearly gotten word of Deidara's death and gone to ground. By the time they got to Sound, it was a deathtrap designed to eliminate them. Kisame had razed the whole village to the ground on principle-he was offended that Orochimaru thought they were stupid enough to get caught like that. He suspected that the snake had done something that should have blocked his companion's Byakugan but, as usual, filed it under things that he didn't ask about.

That was why they were trudging through Mizu. Again. It was a dismal place and jobs were few and far between there. The whole country was still recovering from the internecine fratricide that had been its byword for so long. It meant that they had to resort to ambushing merchants for food. Hinata didn't really care beyond knowing that if they did it often enough, there would be ninja sent for them they would have to kill. It wasted time that could be spent hunting the last of the current threats to Naruto.

There had been a lead six months before, a good one that almost certainly would have led them to Orochimaru. It had also been when word had reached them through informants that Iwa had attempted to kill Uzumaki Naruto and had been repelled at great cost. That hadn't mattered to Hinata; someone had dared to try and harm Naruto and that was an action with only one sentence. Despite her recent reluctance to kill civilians not in the way, that had been set aside.

Kisame had walked calmly through the ruined streets of Iwa, casually using Samehada to kill anyone who managed to enter his reach. There weren't many. A pair of Hinata's shadow clones had split off from her and all three tore the village to shreds, putting everything that lived within the walls to death. It had been one of those times that his young partner was truly other to him. She moved like the wind, dispensing lethal attacks with assurance and a distinct lack of mercy or even apparent feeling.

Those who had fled had been allowed to go, but nothing in the village survived that day. Kisame had decided to make their point abundantly clear and emptied a satchel of explosive tags looted from Deidara to reduce the entire area to rubble then dust then a crater. He had then filled that crater with water, just to be sure that no one missed it. The smile Hinata had given him was the warmest he'd received from her and it was terrifying.

"Hyūga Hinata?" The messenger ninja froze as two dangerous ninja whirled to face him. "I have a message here from an Uzumaki Naruto." He held out a scroll and a sheet of paper. "Please sign here."

A water clone of Kisame stepped forwards and signed, face suspicious.

"Thank you, sir. Have a good day."

Hinata made a shadow clone and let it open the message. A puff of smoke turned into Uzumaki Naruto. "Hi, Hinata-chan!"

"You are a clone," she stated.

"Yep. I have a message for you. Boss says you have to honor your promise now!"

Kisame saw something resembling a true smile spread on Hinata's face.

(A/N John)

This is a fic that has been burning a hole in my head for months or longer. One of two short stories that needed to be told. It all came out of a discussion me and Spoon had (as most of our fics do) about Hinata and what if she was faking it and really was skilled. Things took off from there.

(A/N 2 John)

I really enjoyed writing Hinata, who seemed to have developed some sort of specialized power for detecting where people would feel it the most when she speaks.

(A/N 3 John)

Not sure what else to say about this one. I think it speaks for itself.

Omake

Omakes

Naruto (beginning around the time of the month break following the capture of the Yonbi):

Naruto watched as a subdued Team Ten entered Konoha. Not even all of it. Sarutobi-san wasn't there and neither was Choji. Shikamaru limped slowly, his only remaining arm around Ino's shoulders. His face was a nightmare of burn-scars caked in dried blood and mud. His left eye was ruined, just a pit in the midst of the burns. His left arm was gone and a crude bandage was wrapped around the shoulder, stained with bodily humors and more dirt from the field. His left leg was wrapped in bandages and splinted, but he still left bloody footprints every time he had to put weight on it.

By comparison, Ino looked the picture of health. Her hair was a mess, both chaotically displaced and grimy. Her clothes had severe scorching on them and much of them were rags that looked like they had been torn to supplement Shikamaru's bandages. Actually, there wasn't really much left of them. The Ino Naruto knew would have been absolutely livid about this, but she just had a dead look in her eyes.

The news spread quickly enough. Asuma had died at the hands of Konoha's second most wanted ninja. Rumor said that Orochimaru had toyed with him before the death and bragged about working on collecting the whole set. Choji had died too, using his ability to grow to try and shield his teammates from a contemptuous blast by the snake. It hadn't been enough. Shikamaru had thrown himself in the way to protect Ino, costing him his arm, his eye, and his career in the field.

DIE

Naruto had volunteered to come on the mission to hunt Orochimaru and Kakuzu. There had been some resistance to the idea, but he had pointed out that he needed to live-fire test his newest technique and S-rank missing ninja were excellent targets to apply S-rank techniques to. Also, he refused to not be part of the mission. He had failed to bring Sasuke back, but he could at least kill the one responsible for him leaving. It wouldn't be enough, but it was all he had.

DIE

A specially selected squad was sent to hunt the pair. Maito Gai, Hatake Kakashi, Yamato, and Uzumaki Naruto. It wasn't hard to catch up to them near a bounty office. The fight had quickly escalated.

DIE

Naruto was out of his depth and he knew it. Next to Maito Gai, he really didn't belong here. The man continued to pressure Orochimaru while the snake flung jutsu at Yamato and Gai, keeping them from managing to actually harm him. His ability to swap with a suddenly created clone meant that Gai had yet to land a convincing blow and had been forced to constantly dodge swipes from the kusanagi that left nearby trees in pieces.

Orochimaru was clearly trying to get out of the forest where Yamato had plenty of free sources of material and had taken to wide-area fire attacks to defoliate the region as a literal scorched-earth denial. Still, Gai was moving faster than Naruto could track and Orochimaru was somehow keeping up, if only barely. It was clear that the sanin was having trouble, but all Naruto could do was throw swarms of clones into the mix to keep the man having to track multiple targets. He'd yet to even come close enough to hit.

The chirping of birds drew his attention. If his sensei was breaking out that technique, then things had escalated. He threw a last, sorrowful look at the battle between titans and decided to take the

high road. One fewer Akatsuki was still a win. A pair of clones helped him stabilize his *Futon: Rasengan* .

DIE

Kakuzu heard a whirring screech like glass bells being thrown into a whirlwind of blades. He was about to dodge when he felt the lightning in his chest. His body froze as the energy crackled out of the fist in his chest, nerves locked by the attack. His hearts began to climb out of his back and then the electricity was gone and a grinding, slicing feeling carved through his skull and downwards, obliterating him.

"Excellent timing, Naruto," Kakashi said. "Orochimaru?"

"I couldn't do anything to help," Naruto admitted.

"Yosh!" Naruto jumped as Gai spoke from behind him. "Orochimaru fled quite effectively, I am ashamed to admit."

"He lost an arm first," Yamato supplied as he wiped sweat from his brow. "We'll call it a victory for us."

"Your arm?" Kakashi asked.

"Not great, sensei. I think I could hold a kunai, but I'm not going to be using *Futon: Rasengan* again anytime soon. Tsunade-baa-chan will have my head for this as it is."

"It is a most effective attack, Uzumaki-kun!" Gai cheered. "It is only a shame I could not hold that fiend Orochimaru in place."

"In retrospect," Kakashi murmured, "it might have been best to have you engage him from a distance. If we'd surprised him, you might have been able to manage."

"Doubtful. He is most slippery. Had I not used the gates, he would have eluded me completely. He was unable to fight me properly, but

he has a devastating array of attacks that forced me to fight without the full advantage of my speed. He truly is a genius."

"Would have been nice to try. But with them in the middle of a village, we didn't have much choice but to force them out first."

"Agreed. Shall we race back to Konoha to share the good news?"

DIE

Naruto stared at the Hokage Monument, unseeing. They had been riding high on the success of eliminating Kakuzu, marred only by the escape of Orochimaru, when they returned to Konoha. There had been a pall over the village, though none of the citizens seemed aware of it. An ANBU had appeared with a summons to the Hokage that had emphasized the presence of Yamato.

At first, he hadn't believed the news from the elderly toad on the Hokage's desk. He'd thought it was some sort of prank or joke or something. It had to be. Jiraiya couldn't be dead. Only the look on the toad's face-defeated, a little lost, and angry-had said otherwise. It should have been a bad dream. He'd had plenty of those while on his training trip, all too aware of his failure to save Sasuke from his own darkness.

The disbelief hadn't lasted and in place of it had come the anger. Bloody red, raw, cold. He'd expected it to feel like a fire, but it just felt as if all the heat left his body and was replaced with the desire to rendtear kill . He'd felt the parting of flesh under claws, tasted the tang of blood as he tore with fangs. He'd had to throw back his head and let out a roar just to allow some of the hate out. It was so clean. He could slip into this fury and let it wash away the hurt and the loss and the confusion. It would be easy. Just lose himself in the feeling of death.

He could feel them, tail after tail extending from his body as the Kyūbi spoke to him. It promised all the vengeance he could ever desire and the power to bring ruin to those who had hurt him. It had

offered before, but this time he was tempted to accept the offer. It roared in anger and this time it felt like it roared with him. It new the pain of helplessness. All he had to do was let it help and he'd be able to hunthurtslaughter those in Ame who had turned their backs on the dream of peace.

Naruto came back to himself as a wooden cage fixed itself around him, hammering the Bijū in his gut back to its own prison. It drained away, taking the comforting cloak of numbing rage with it. All that he had left was the loss and it bubbled out of him in wracking sobs. He wasn't aware of the damage he'd done to the Hokage Tower, the ninja who had gathered, ready to strike him down if the beast had broken free. He just let the tears flow as he'd sworn he never would again after the death of the Sandaime. Long after his eyes had dried and his body had given up on it, he lay curled up in the conjured wood. He didn't want to move and would have happily lain there forever, but a slimy hand rested on his shoulder.

"I miss him too," the old toad had said in a croaking voice. "He was betrayed by someone he thought was going to save the world. I am sad and angry. I will not tell you not to feel as some would." The voice was calm and kind, sorrowful, but tempered by something Naruto didn't have a word for. "Feeling nothing makes you nothing. But there is danger in too much anger or sadness or envy. For you, that danger is greater. Your rage could burn the world down. Do you want these people who care about you to be turned to ash?"

Naruto had raised his head to see Kakashi and Tsunade and Sakura surrounding the wooden cage, concern on their faces. Tsunade and Sakura were busily using medical chakra to cleanse the taint of the Bijū from Kakashi's arms. The cloth of his shirt had melted into his flesh where he had tried to shake Naruto out of his fit.

"No."

"Then you need to learn control, boy. Master yourself. Avenge the fallen if you will; hate his killers, too. Never let it rule you."

"Can you teach me?"

The toad shrugged. "Maybe. I can try. If you don't learn to leash yourself, one day you won't be able to be stopped."

Now Naruto faced a long period of study to master senjutsu. He would leave in the morning for an unknown length of time to be in a place where people would be able to stop him if he lost himself to rage. He could feel it bubbling away still.

DIE

Naruto got the message from Gamakachi. He'd been about ready to return anyway. It had taken time and effort, but there was a sense of peace now. It fell about his shoulders like a cloak, like the one he wore. It had been given to him by the toads when he had completed the steps of mastering his own darkness and been anointed a sage by the elders.

"Konoha is falling."

He landed in ruins. Half the village had been obliterated. The dead were in pieces, scattered around. There were a cadre of orange-haired figures standing at the outskirts, all wearing the distinctive cloak of the Akatsuki.

"I repeat," they said together, "send out Uzumaki Naruto, or we kill the rest of the village."

Naruto considered fighting. He knew he could hurt them. But Jiraiya had been unable to do it. And if he fought and didn't do it right, the village would die. He didn't hesitate. He stepped out of the shadows. "My life for my village."

DIE

Naruto woke a second time since he had expected to die. His vision was very strange, slightly purpled and his eyes hurt. Granted, the

rest of him was pretty achey, but this was more... sharp. It dug into his skull.

Well then, brat. Naruto froze. The Kyūbi had been completely silent since his sage training had begun to take. He knew it wouldn't last, but since his emotions had come under control, he'd had nothing and had hoped it meant it was cut off. **You've got my father's eyes.** So the giant fox had a father? **I do indeed. And now I know why you're familiar. Welcome back, Asura.**

Naruto wandered into the ruins of Konoha, still talking with the beast in his gut. It had been learning senjutsu along with him, hoping to use it to overpower him and had instead found peace. For all its displeasure at being offered up to someone who wanted to use it, the Bijū had nevertheless been impressed by his willingness to save others. Without Uchiha Madara, or its hundred-years-long rage, it was reminded of its favorite brother.

"Naruto!" Sakura shouted as she spotted him.

"Hey, Sakura. The Kyūbi says that we can help. Where're the dead being gathered up?"

DIE

The army of Iwa approached Konoha. It had taken them a few months to gather enough forces to be sure of crushing their hated foe, but the village should still be reeling from the destruction that had been visited onto it.

Standing in the distance was a single figure. With yellow hair. A robe flapped in the wind. Then two more joined it. The pair flanking the central figure knelt into seiza.

"I am Uzumaki Naruto, son of Minato Namikaze. This is your warning: go home now."

The Tsuchikage made a dismissive gesture and his ninja charged.

DIE

"Congratulations, Naruto," Tsunade said, her grin huge. "Younger than your father and you managed to make it to Hokage."

"I'm so proud!" Kushina cheered, her own grin threatening to remove her head.

"I have a promise to keep." Naruto picked up a sheet of paper and began to write.

(A/N John)

The omake on the other hand... it's definitely shorter than it could have been, but it's not really supposed to be a full story, just a bit of story to fill in some of the blanks. Like my idea that in this world, senjutsu requires control partly for the harmony with nature and partly because the toads wouldn't want someone who's a loose cannon to be able to use senjutsu.

(A/N 2 John)

About Kushina: yes, Naruto used the Rinnegan to bring her back, just like he had a pair of paths gathering nature chakra for him during the fight with Iwa. Well, I say "fight" but that's really a bad way of putting it. More like "making them wish Minato had been there instead". He also brought back most of the casualties from the attack on Konoha. He can use nature chakra to cheat the cost since that is essentially life-energy. Does that apply in other stories? We shall see.